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ABSTRACT

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Identifying Meaningful Behaviors for Social Competence: A Contextual Approach

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Abstract

An exploratory study was conducted which assessed behaviors that characterize social competence in the 2nd and 5th grades. A contextual approach was used to gather information from 2nd and 5th grade children and their parents and teachers regarding the behaviors they perceived to be important for getting along well with peers. Data were gathered from children through structured interviews with the researcher. Parents and teachers provided information through open-ended paper-pencil surveys. Qualitative methodology was used to analyze the data in this study. Specifically, a three-stage coding process derived from grounded theory was utilized (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Triangulation, a technique common to qualitative research whereby multiple sources are used to verify themes identified from data, also was used throughout the coding process to ensure that standards of rigor were met (Creswell, 1998). Results indicated a variety of noteworthy similarities and differences among 2nd and 5th grade sources. Findings are discussed in terms of their implications for social skills assessment and intervention. Limitations and directions for future research also are discussed.

A Contextual Approach to the Assessment of Social Skills: Identifying Meaningful Behaviors for Social Competence

Effective social functioning is a critical factor in child development. Children must have adequate social skills to be successful at school, at home, and in the community. Children who lack important social skills often are rejected by their peers, have trouble interacting with their teachers and families, and have emotional difficulties (Coie & Dodge, 1988; Dodge, 1983; Parker & Asher, 1987, Vosk, Forehand, Parker, & Rickard, 1982). Furthermore, social skills deficits are frequently associated with children exhibiting externalizing disorders such as delinquency and conduct disorder, as well as those with internalizing disorders like depression and anxiety (Mash & Barkley, 1996). Because social competence has a significant impact on development, identifying behaviors that are meaningful in children's social networks is of critical importance.

What are Social Skills?

Researchers have defined social skills in a number of ways. Often a distinction is made between social skills and social competence. Social skills typically refer to discrete, goal-directed behaviors that allow an individual to interact effectively with others in his or her environment (Sheridan & Walker, 1999). Social competence, on the other hand, generally refers to the quality of an individual's social interactions as perceived by those around him or her (Gresham, 1986; McFall, 1982). Taken together, it emerges that for children to attain social skillfulness, they must not only acquire important social behaviors for interacting with others, but must be able to use these skills in ways that are acceptable to others in their environment (Sheridan & Walker, 1999).

Social behaviors do not occur in isolation; thus, the various factors that influence children's social functioning should be considered. Social behaviors are directly related to the contexts surrounding children. A contextual approach to understanding social competence requires that we not only consider the goals and motivations of social behavior from the child's perspective, but that we consider the responses of others in the environment which reinforce or discourage the social behavior of the child (Haring, 1992; Sheridan & Walker, 1999). The behaviors, cognitions, and expectations of others directly influence the type of interpersonal behaviors that are necessary for appropriate interaction. Socially skilled individuals are able to understand the perspectives of others and react appropriately. Social behaviors that are effective in one context or with one person may not be appropriate in another environment or with another individual.

This principle can be understood by considering the various settings in which children frequently interact such as at school and home. Each of these settings clearly requires different behaviors for appropriate social functioning, as the expectations and normative behavior vary across home and school contexts. For example, it may be acceptable for a child to roughhouse with a peer at home; however, this same behavior may not be tolerated at school. Likewise, interacting with a friend at school may call for different skills than interacting with parents and siblings at home. Children must be able to negotiate the differences in expectations and demands across settings and behave in a way that adapts to the parameters of the context. Thus, being socially skilled not only requires a working knowledge of pro-social behaviors, but it requires an understanding and an adaptation to various contextual conditions (e.g., the setting and others in the environment).

Traditional Assessment of Social Skills

Social skills assessments have traditionally focused on identifying individual social deficiencies within a child and evaluating treatment outcomes (Sheridan & Walker, 1999). Researchers and practitioners have used a variety of methods by which to assess children's social skills. Three of the most common assessment techniques include using the evaluations of others (e g., ratings and reports of peers, teachers, and parents), self-reports, and direct observations (Elliott & Busse, 1991; Foster, Inderbitzen, & Nangle, 1993; Gresham, 1995; Gresham & Elliott, 1984; Maag, 1989; Merrell & Gimpel, 1998; Sheridan & Walker, 1999). A brief description of these techniques is provided below. For a more extensive overview of social skills assessment procedures see Elliott and Busse (1991), Foster et al. (1993), Merrell and Gimpel (1998), and Sheridan and Walker (1999).

The evaluations of others can be helpful in determining a child's level of social competence. Rating scales are one way that information can be gathered from others in a child's environment (Elliott & Bussee, 1991; Merrell & Gimpel, 1998; Sheridan & Walker, 1999). These scales require teachers and parents to rate children on a number of specified criteria. In addition to providing information about a child's individual social behaviors, many of these scales are standardized and allow for a comparison of the child's behavior to that of a same-aged norm group. Some of the common norm-referenced and psychometrically acceptable rating scales used to assess children's social skills include: Behavioral Assessment System for Children (BASC; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 1992), Social Skills Rating Systems (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990), Walker-McConnell Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment (WMS; Walker & McConnell, 1988), and the Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales (PKBS; Merrell, 1994).

Teacher nominations and rankings comprise another evaluative assessment of a child's social skills (Elliott & Busse, 1991; Foster et al., 1993; Sheridan & Walker, 1999). Using this technique, teachers are asked to provide a list of students who demonstrate a specific behavioral characteristic to the greatest or least extent in comparison to classmates (e.g., "is the most cooperative," "is the most disruptive," or "is the friendliest"). This allows for a relative comparison of a child's social skills to that of other children in the classroom. Peer ratings and/or nominations (i.e., sociometrics) are conducted in much the same way with peers rating or nominating other children according to specific behavioral characteristics. Using peers as information sources allows researchers and practitioners to identify a child's social standing in his or her peer group.

Self-reports provide information about the child's subjective perceptions of his or her own social competence (Elliott & Busse, 1991; Foster et al., 1993; Merrell & Gimpel, 1998; Sheridan & Walker, 1999). This technique requires that a child report thoughts and opinions about his or her social behaviors and relationships. Children also can be asked to report how they would handle various social situations or interactions. Although self-reports can provide unique information regarding a child's perceptions of his or her social behavior, the subjective nature of this technique precludes criterion-related validity and as such, is not often used as a stand-alone procedure for assessing social competence.

Direct behavioral observation is another method of assessing a child's social skills (Elliott & Busse, 1991; Foster et al., 1993; Merrell & Gimpel, 1998; Sheridan & Walker, 1999). Using an observational coding system that defines specific categories of behavior, observers can record the behavior of a child over a period of time. This can be done through a variety of recording methods such as narrative, interval, event, and rating. Behavioral observation can

occur in the child's natural environment as well as in analogue settings. When conducted in a naturalistic setting, behavioral observation allows for an understanding of the frequency and range of social behaviors in the child's repertoire, as well as a look at the function of the child's behavior in the environment (e.g., any influential antecedent, sequential, or consequential conditions that may maintain or discourage social behavior). Observations in analogue settings are useful when naturalistic observations are unavailable. With this technique, the child is presented with a role-play scenario that is designed to elicit a social response. The child's performance in the role-play can provide information regarding the child's competence in dealing with various social situations. Although analogue observations provide a means of eliciting responses not easily observed during naturalistic settings, some concerns have been raised about the validity of this technique and its correspondence to a child's behavior in the natural environment (Foster et al., 1993; Sheridan & Walker, 1999).

Limitations of Traditional Assessment Procedures

Each of the aforementioned assessment techniques provides unique information regarding a child's social skills; however, these methods tend to emphasize intra-individual variables (e.g., the child's knowledge and performance of various social behaviors), giving little attention to the contextual factors that impact social functioning (Haring, 1992; Sheridan, Hungelmann, & Maughan, 1999; Sheridan & Walker, 1999). As a result, these assessments provide information regarding the various behaviors that a child does and does not exhibit. It is often assumed that based on this information, interventions can be developed by looking at excesses and deficits in the child's behavioral repertoire and teaching appropriate behavioral adjustments. Unfortunately, the use of behavioral excesses and deficiencies to determine targets for intervention fails to account for the meaningfulness of various social behaviors within a given

context. Even though new behaviors may be taught to the child, these behaviors may not be functional within that child's social network (Haring, 1992). Despite the fact that parents, teachers, and peers can provide helpful information regarding a child's specific behaviors, these sources are not generally questioned about the types of behaviors that are relevant and meaningful within the child's social environment. Little information is provided regarding the specific skills that are important for the child to learn in order to get along with others and increase his or her status within the social network.

Contextual Approach to Social Skills Assessment

A contextualized approach is needed to determine the types of social skills that are meaningful in a child's social network. Although many practitioners and researchers advocate for a multimodal approach to social skills assessment (i.e., the incorporation of various methods, sources, and settings into the assessment process, Carey & Stoner, 1994, Elliott & Busse, 1991, Gresham, 1995; Maag, 1989; Sheridan et al., 1999, Sheridan & Walker, 1999, Walker, Irvin, Noell, & Singer, 1992), this assessment approach is rarely used (Maag, 1989, Sheridan et al., 1999). In keeping with a contextual framework for understanding social skills, not only must the behaviors and perspectives of an individual child be examined, but the social responses and expectations of the environments in which that child interacts also must be accounted for (Haring, 1992; Sheridan et al., 1999; Sheridan & Walker, 1999). As mentioned previously, various environments, as well as individuals, demand different social behaviors for adaptive functioning. Furthermore, what is appropriate in one context may not be socially acceptable in another. Thus, before a child can be taught how to interact effectively in his or her environment, professionals must first determine the specific behaviors that are meaningful in that child's social

network. It can then be assumed that when taught these identified behaviors, there will be a positive change in the child's social functioning.

Researchers have emphasized the importance of incorporating contextually meaningful information into intervention programming and evaluation. Kazdin (1977) highlights the importance of the evaluation of others in determining the meaningfulness of treatment outcomes. A critical component in determining the significance of a behavior change for a particular client involves assessing the functioning of the client within a given social context after the behavior change has occurred (Kazdin, 1977). Thus, the validity of behavioral interventions rests on the reactions and perceptions of others in the client's social context to the new behaviors exhibited by the client.

The importance of socially valid treatment outcomes has implications for social skills assessment and intervention programming. Not only must children learn various pro-social behaviors, but these behaviors must be meaningful within their social networks. It is only when social behaviors are meaningful that they are reinforced in the child's social context and the process of "behavioral entrapment" may occur whereby newly learned social responses come under the control of naturally occurring reinforcers (McConnell, 1987). Within this framework, newly learned social behaviors must be naturally reinforced to generalize to a child's natural environment (Fox & McEvoy, 1993; McConnell, 1987). When others in the environment reinforce the social skills being used, children are more likely to continue to use the skills on a regular basis. Because parents, teachers, and peers are relevant information sources, it can be assumed that the social behaviors rated highly by these sources may be those that will be naturally reinforced in the environment.

The necessity of considering contextual information such as that provided by teachers, peers, and independent observers in social skills assessment and programming has been discussed in the social skills literature. Sheridan and colleagues (1999) describe a procedure designed to gather contextually relevant information regarding the behavior of socially competent children. Specifically, with this procedure, teachers, peers, and independent observers each could provide a written list of behaviors that are deemed important for children's social competence. In gathering information from these various sources, specific behaviors could be identified that correspond to social competence for a particular group of children within a given context. The identified behaviors would in essence comprise a "template" for social competence. Similarly, "template matching" has been suggested as a technique to identify important social behaviors of children (Hoier & Cone, 1987). In one study, 8 and 9 year-old children participated in a 50-item Q-sort procedure to identify specific behaviors that were critical for being a good friend (Hoier & Cone, 1987). The identified behaviors were described as comprising a "template" of a socially competent child.

The template created through the assessment procedure described by Sheridan et al. (1999) eventually could be used to help identify target behaviors for social skills interventions by comparing the behaviors of children with social difficulties to those behaviors on the template. Any behaviors on the template for social competence, but not exhibited by the child with social difficulties, could be targets for intervention. Although this assessment procedure has undergone some pilot experimentation, very little research has been conducted in this area.

The current study expands the research on contextualized approaches to the assessment of social skills. A procedure similar to that outlined by Sheridan et al. (1999) was used to gather information from parents, teachers, and peers regarding the specific behaviors that are important

for social competence in 2nd and 5th grade children. The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the types of behaviors that relevant sources (i.e., parents, teachers, and peers) reported as meaningful for social competence at two different developmental levels (2nd and 5th grades). Specific research questions included: (1) What behaviors do parents, teachers, and children report as important for being a good friend in the 2nd and 5th grades? and (2) What similarities and differences are there among the types of behaviors reported by relevant sources within each developmental level?

Methods

Participants and Setting

The participants for this study included 2nd and 5th grade children and their respective teachers and parents. Participants were recruited from two public elementary schools located in Lincoln, Nebraska. Both schools were large in size, serving approximately 600 children. The average class size for each of the schools was approximately 20-25 students. The schools served students who generally came from middle to lower-middle socioeconomic households. For 2nd grade, a total of 45 children, 37 parents, and 8 teachers participated in the study. For 5th grade, a total of 36 children, 38 parents, and 10 teachers participated.

A letter describing the research study and corresponding consent form was sent to the parents and legal guardians of the recruited children. Parents were provided four options for consent: (a) Their child's participation only, (b) their own participation only, (c) both their child's and their own participation, or (d) neither their child's nor their own participation. Only those children whose parents or legal guardians consented for their participation were allowed to participate in the study. Second and fifth grade teachers from the two schools were recruited.

Teachers received a letter describing the research study and were required to sign a consent form before participating.

Data Collection

Parent and teacher surveys. Data were gathered from children, parents, and teachers regarding their perceptions of the behaviors that are important for social competence. Parents and teachers were provided an open-ended survey requesting them to list specific behaviors that are important for children of their respective child's age to get along well with peers. There was no limit to the number of responses that parents and teachers could report. Parents and teachers were encouraged to list as many behaviors as possible.

Child interviews. Data from children were collected through individual structured interviews with a researcher. A total of 45 interviews were conducted with 2nd grade children and 36 interviews were conducted with 5th grade children (i.e., one per participant). The researcher began the interview by using an open-ended statement to elicit responses from children: *"Think about some people who you consider good friends. There are probably things they do to let you know they are good friends. What kinds of things do you see them do that let you know they are good friends?"* Structured follow-up questioning was implemented by the researcher in cases where vague or non-behavioral responses were provided by children. For example, if the child reported that good friends "are nice," the researcher asked him/her to be specific in the response through questions such as, "What kinds of things do good friends *do* to *show* you they are nice?" During the interview, the researcher encouraged child participants to think of as many responses as they could, using questions such as "Anything else?" and "Can you think of anymore?" All interviews were audiotaped to allow for the analysis of interview integrity.

Data Analysis

Qualitative methodology was used to analyze the data in this study. Specifically, a three-stage coding process derived from grounded theory was utilized (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Triangulation, a technique common to qualitative research whereby multiple sources are used to verify themes identified from data, also was used throughout the coding process to ensure that standards of rigor were met (Creswell, 1998).

Open coding. In the initial open coding stage, preliminary response categories were identified by examining similarities in responses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The principal researcher identified some initial response categories for each data set (2nd and 5th grade children, parents, and teachers) and coded the data to reflect these categories. Categories were derived for only those responses where there was an obvious similarity in theme (e.g., "helps with math" and "helps with English" were coded as "helps with academics"); thus, not all responses were captured by these categories. Using triangulation, two research assistants coded the same data, yielding 93% and 95% reliability scores, respectively, against the primary researcher's response codes. Through open coding, each of the six data sets (2nd grade children, parents, and teachers, and 5th grade children, parents, and teachers) comprising total responses from participants were reduced in size from 241 to 101 responses (2nd grade children), 339 to 207 responses (2nd grade parents), 89 to 68 responses (2nd grade teachers), 215 to 125 responses (5th grade children), 317 to 226 responses (5th grade parents), and 79 to 68 responses (5th grade teachers).

Axial coding. The second stage, axial coding, allowed the researcher to assemble the data in new ways and form additional response categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During axial coding, all response categories identified in the open coding stage and those responses not coded into categories were used in a card sort procedure. All responses were placed on index cards and

sorted into piles based on similarities in theme. Using triangulation, two research assistants sorted each of the six data sets (2nd grade children, parents, and teachers, and 5th grade children, parents, and teachers). The research assistants were instructed to sort the cards into as many piles as they saw fit, based on similarities and theme. There were no limits to the number of piles that could be created for each data set.

Selective coding. The last stage of the coding process was selective coding. In this stage, the researcher identified general response themes that emerged from each of the data sets (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data from the card sorts were utilized in this stage by assessing the specific responses that were placed in the same pile by both sorters. The researcher reviewed all sorted piles and identified general themes for each of the six data sets.

Integrity of Child Interviews

Integrity of the child interviews was assessed to ensure that the researcher used the same interview procedures for each child. A checklist was created that detailed specific interview objectives (i.e., interviewer's use the open-ended statement to begin the interview, follow-up questioning for vague responses, questioning to elicit additional responses and determine if the child was finished responding, effectively terminating the interview when the child was finished responding). All interviews were audiotaped and attainment of the interview objectives was assessed through direct observation by independent coders. Thirty three percent of the 2nd and 5th grade interviews (i.e., 15-2nd grade interviews and 12-5th grade interviews) were randomly selected and reviewed by two independent coders. Using the checklist, the coders rated each interview and provided a percentage of interview objectives met.

Results

The social behaviors identified by all participant groups as important for social competence are reported in Tables 1 through 5. All behaviors reported in the tables represent the themes that emerged from the card sorting technique during the selective coding phase of data analysis. Thus, these behaviors suggest an adequate representation of the responses made by parent, teacher, and child participants. Social behaviors reported by 2nd grade children and one or more adults (i.e., parents and/or teachers) are found in Table 1. In some cases all three sources (i.e., children, parents, and teachers) reported the behavior, and in other cases only two sources reported the behavior. Within the table, behaviors are ordered first by those that were identified by all three sources (i.e., children, parents, and teachers), followed by those that were identified by only two sources (i.e., children and parents or children and teachers). Table 2 provides identical information to Table 1, but includes the social behaviors reported by 5th grade sources rather than those reported by 2nd grade sources.

Social behaviors only reported by parents and teachers are found in Tables 3 and 4. Table 3 identifies those behaviors reported by 2nd grade parents and/or teachers as important for social competence, but not reported by 2nd grade children. Table 4 reports identical information to Table 3, but for 5th grade sources. Social behaviors identified only by children as important for social competence are located in Table 5.

Integrity of Child Interviews

Integrity of the child interviews was assessed through direct observations by independent coders. For all interviews, the percentage of objectives met ranged from 50 to 100%, with an overall mean of 96%. Percentage of objectives met for 2nd and 5th grade interviews averaged 94% and 98%, respectively.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that there are specific types of behaviors that stand out as important for social competence in the 2nd and 5th grades. It can be argued that children are the primary criterion population by which the social validity or meaningfulness of social behavior within peer networks can be measured; hence, the behaviors reported by 2nd and 5th grade children are significant. Those behaviors reported by children that are likewise reported by parents and/or teachers are especially noteworthy, as these behaviors are validated by additional relevant sources within the social environment and are viewed as important from multiple perspectives.

Although some differences were found among the behaviors reported by all three sources within each grade level, substantial overlap existed among the types of behaviors reported by children, parents, and teachers (see Tables 1 and 2). In 2nd grade, children, parents, and teachers all reported that compromising, being empathetic, being respectful of others and their property, helping others with their personal work, not verbally hurting others, having a positive and happy disposition, being loyal and reliable to friends, and being outgoing and friendly were important behaviors for being a good friend. Likewise, 5th grade children, parents, and teachers all reported that compromising, being trustworthy, being empathetic, helping others with their personal work, not verbally hurting others, giving praise and compliments to others, being funny, and spending time together were important behaviors for being a good friend. These aforementioned behaviors are important from multiple perspectives within children's environments; thus, they most likely play a significant role in the social networks of 2nd and 5th grade children.

Comparison of the responses of 2nd and 5th grade sources indicates that many of the same types of social behaviors were reported at both grade levels (i.e., compromising, empathy, help

others with personal work, not verbally hurting others, loyal and reliable to friends, trustworthy, not physically harmful, funny, spend time together, invite others to do things). This suggests that some behaviors cross developmental levels in terms of their significance within the social milieus of 2nd and 5th graders. Even though the same behaviors may be reported in the 2nd and 5th grades, it is possible that the presentation of these social behaviors varies among the different grade levels. For example, being funny may be expressed differently in the 2nd and 5th grades (e.g., making funny faces vs. telling a joke or being sarcastic). Likewise, expressions of empathy may look very different among the 2nd and 5th grades (e.g., asking a peer who appears sad to join in an activity vs. pats on the back and talking about problems).

Although there are many similarities in the responses of 2nd and 5th grade sources, some differences are evident. Many of the behaviors reported by 2nd grade children, parents, and teachers tend to be rule-governed behaviors (e.g., being respectful of others and their property, following and respecting rules, being fair, and having manners) (see Table 1). This is not surprising considering the importance placed on rules and rule-following at this age level. Second graders have attended formal schooling for less than two years during which time there is a strong emphasis placed on learning to adhere to the structure and boundaries of school life. It is likely that children and the adults in their lives (i.e., parents and teachers) perceive rule-governed behaviors as important for social competence given the significance placed on these behaviors at this grade-level. In comparison, many of the behaviors reported by 5th grade sources involve verbal communication (e.g., communicating verbally about problems and frustrations, being a good listener, giving praise and compliments to others) (see Table 2). This result is consistent with the natural developmental differences found between 2nd and 5th grade children. Language-based communication is not as developed in younger children, thus

behaviors involving verbal communication would be expected to have greater importance in the 5th grade as compared to the 2nd grade.

The findings of this study highlight the richness and complexity of social competence within children's social networks. Many of the social behaviors identified by participants are not simple and discrete. For example, behaviors such as trustworthiness, empathy, having a happy disposition, being respectful of others and their property, and being loyal and reliable to friends are complex personal characteristics that cannot easily be defined. The original responses of participants that were used during the coding process to create the final behavioral categories reported in this study provide some concrete examples of the aforementioned behaviors (e.g., trustworthy is comprised of behaviors such as "keeps secrets" and "don't lie," and empathy is comprised of behaviors such as "helps you when you are sad" and "makes you feel happy when you are feeling down"). However, the complex nature of these behavioral constructs aligns closely with the innate qualities of an individual's character, rather than discrete behaviors typically assessed for or taught in social skills training.

Many of the behaviors identified in this study as important for social competence can be assessed through various social skills ratings scales; however, they are not consistently incorporated into the rating scales used to assess children. In an extensive review and factor analysis of the social skills assessed through common ratings scales (Caldarella & Merrell, 1997), a Peer Relations Factor was identified that is comprised of behaviors such as compliments and praises others, offers help to others, is sensitive to others' feelings (e.g., empathy and sympathy), has a sense of humor, and compromises with others. Many of the aforementioned behaviors are similar to those identified in the present study. Results of Caldarella and Merrell's analysis (1997) indicate, however, that these behaviors were incorporated into only a fraction of

the rating scales commonly used to assess children's social competence (i.e., occurrence rates of 36-70%). Thus, although the aforementioned behaviors may be addressed through rating scales, assessment of these behaviors is not standard practice.

Many of the behaviors reported by participants in this study are not those typically targeted in social skills training packages. Common targets for social skills training often include assertiveness and conflict management behaviors such as initiating and maintaining conversations with others, sharing, playing cooperatively, joining in groups, problem-solving, and using self-control (Goldstein, Sprafkin, Gershaw, & Klein, 1980; McGinnis, Goldstein, Sprafkin, & Gershaw, 1984; Odom, & McConnell, 1997; Sheridan, 1995). Although empathy training has been incorporated into some social skills training programs (e.g., Beland, 1992; Goldstein et al., 1980; McGinnis et al., 1984), it has not historically been an integral part of social intervention programming. Likewise, trustworthiness, respectfulness, loyalty, and reliability are characteristics not typically addressed in social skills training.

Limitations

One limitation of the current study is the restricted nature of the sample. Results are based on data from 2nd and 5th grade children, parents, and teachers in two elementary schools in a mid-sized mid-Western city. Given the contextual nature of social behavior, it can be assumed that differences exist with regard to the types of social skills that are normative for children at different grade levels and in different geographic locations. Thus, conclusions cannot be made beyond the defining characteristics of the sample population. Furthermore, there are limited teacher data compared to that from children and parents. To make conclusions about the types of behaviors that are important for social competence within a particular context, efforts were made to gather information from sources within similar contexts (i.e., child, parent, and teacher data

from the same grade levels at the same two schools). As such, a limited number of teachers were eligible to provide data (i.e., 4-5 second and fifth grade teachers per building).

Another limitation concerns the slight variability of responses that comprise the behavioral categories for each data set. Due to the vast amount of qualitative data gathered from participants, data were organized into conceptual categories to capture themes in data. Though handled in a rigorous fashion through structured coding and triangulation, some slight variation exists within the behaviors that comprise the themes that emerged from the coding process (e.g., trustworthy was comprised of responses such as "can keep secrets" and "tells the truth").

Finally, the outcomes of this study are based on the subjective perceptions of parent, teacher, and child participants and are not validated through direct observations of socially competent children. Although participant sources may perceive various behaviors as important for social competence, it is possible that these particular behaviors are not demonstrated by socially competent children in the environment. Direct observations of competent children would provide validation for parent, teacher, and child reports.

Future Directions

Future research is needed to examine the validity and treatment utility of the assessment procedure used in this study. Criterion related validity could be assessed through direct observations of popular, socially skilled peers within social networks. Demonstration of the behaviors that characterize social competence by children perceived to be socially skilled would lend support for the validity of the assessment procedure. Furthermore, future research could examine the utility of using the behaviors identified through this assessment procedure as targets in social skills intervention. Once identified by relevant sources, specific behaviors that correspond to social competence could be taught to children with social skills difficulties.

Positive changes in social functioning as measured through observations, ratings, and interviews would suggest that the contextual assessment procedure is a useful method for identifying targets for social skills treatment interventions.

The current study utilized a contextual approach to assess the behaviors that are important for social competence at two grade levels. Results indicate that, although there is some overlap among the types of behaviors reported by children, parents, and teachers in the 2nd and 5th grades, there are some unique differences as well. Future research could examine the use of this assessment procedure with other contexts (e.g., other grade levels, types of schools, SES, geographical locations) to identify similarities and differences in behaviors that correspond to peer-related social competence. It is likely that the variation in expectations, norms, and task demands found in different contexts would produce noteworthy differences in the types of behaviors related to social competence in these environments.

The results of this study suggest that peer related social competence cannot be easily defined by a set of discrete pro-social behaviors. There are a number of complex personal characteristics that children, parents, and teachers perceive as essential for getting along with others (e.g., trustworthiness, having a happy disposition, being loyal and reliable). Standard intervention for children with social difficulties tends to include instruction on discrete pro-social behaviors often found in social skills training packages. Unfortunately, many of the behavioral characteristics identified in this study as important for social competence are not addressed in intervention with children. One possible reason for this is that the complex behaviors identified here are not easily defined. Future research could begin to operationalize these behavioral constructs to teach them to children. Extensive observations of peer networks may be helpful to this end, as observers may be able to identify the subtle nuances involved in the expression of

these behaviors (e.g., What does it look like when children "stick up" for each other, help each other when they are sad, and have a positive disposition?). Furthermore, research could examine various methods for helping children utilize the behaviors identified as important for social competence. Because many of the identified behaviors do not lend themselves to discrete steps (e.g., trustworthiness, loyalty and reliability, respectfulness,) typical methods of social skills instruction (e.g., skill instruction, modeling, role play) may not apply. Other methods of instruction could be explored to further children's knowledge and use of meaningful behaviors (e.g., use of social stories and dialogue about the relevance of important behavioral attributes).

Conclusion

Social competence is a critical factor in the development of children. Identifying behaviors that are necessary for children to get along with their peers is of the utmost importance. The types of behaviors that are expected and reinforced within children's social networks are largely determined by the individuals who function within children's environments (e.g., peers, teachers, parents). Thus, a contextual approach is needed to assess the behaviors that are meaningful and that correspond to social competence for children. The current study expanded the research literature by utilizing a contextual assessment approach to identify behaviors for social competence in the 2nd and 5th grades. Results of this exploratory study provide an initial foundation for future research and development in this important area.

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Table 1

Social Behaviors Reported by 2nd Grade Children and One or More Adults

Source	Social Behavior
C,P,T	Compromising (e.g., can "give in", can negotiate, don't always have to have their way or be first, not bossy)
C,P,T	Empathetic (e.g., sympathetic, nurturing, caring, compassionate, help when sad/emotional)
C,P,T	Respectful of others (adults and peers) and their property (e.g., don't destroy and lose things)
C,P,T	Help of others with personal work (e.g., pick up things, find things)
C,P,T	Do not verbally hurt others (e.g., name call, talk behind their back, criticize, be bossy, say "shut up", pick on them, tattle on them)
C,P,T	Positive and happy disposition (e.g., positive attitude, smile often, happy, fun)
C,P,T	Loyal and reliable to friends (e.g., stick up for them)
C,P,T	Outgoing and friendly (e.g., can approach others with ease, ask to be friends with others, initiates conversations)
C,P	Trustworthy (e.g., can keep secrets, tells the truth)
C,P	Do not physically harm others
C,P	Have manners (e.g., polite, courteous, say "please" and "thank you")
C,P	Follow and respect rules (e.g., at school)
C,P	Funny (e.g., make others laugh, humorous)
C,P	Spend time together (e.g., recess, after school, come to your house, come to your parties, talking on the phone)
C,P	Fair (e.g., take turns, make decisions together about how to play games)
C,P	Have things in common with friends (e.g., do and play what they like to)

C,T	Invite others to do things (e.g., birthday parties, over to play)

Note. C = Children; P = Parent; T = Teacher

Table 2

Social Behaviors Reported by 5th Grade Children and One or More Adults

Source	Social Behavior
C,P,T	Compromising (e.g., can "give in", can negotiate, don't always have to have their way or be first, not bossy)
C,P,T	Trustworthy (e.g., can keep secrets, tells the truth)
C,P,T	Empathetic (e.g., sympathetic, nurturing, caring, compassionate, help when sad/emotional)
C,P,T	Help of others with personal work (e.g., pick up things, find things)
C,P,T	Do not verbally hurt others (e.g., name call, talk behind their back, criticize, be bossy, say "shut up", pick on them, tattle on them)
C,P,T	Give praise and compliments to others (support and encourage them)
C,P,T	Funny (e.g., make others laugh, humorous)
C,P,T	Spend time together (e.g., recess, after school, come to your house, come to your parties, talking on the phone)
C,P	Communicate verbally about problems and frustrations
C,P	Good listener (e.g., listen to others)
C,P	Invite others to do things (e.g., birthday parties, over to play)
C,P	Loyal and reliable to friends (e.g., stick up for them)
C,P	Generous and share (e.g., give you toys, money)
C,P	Help others learn/do play activities
C,P	Keep friends from doing bad things (e.g., drugs and alcohol)
C,T	Do not physically harm others
C,T	Inclusive of others

C,T	Takes schoolwork seriously (e.g., academic goals, does homework)

Note. C = Children; P = Parent; T = Teacher

Table 3

Social Behaviors Only Reported by 2nd Grade Parents and/or Teachers

Source	Social Behavior
P,T	Give praise and compliments to others (support and encourage them)
P	Communicate verbally about problems and frustrations
P	Accepting of others (e.g., do not discriminate against race, SES, etc.)
P	Good listener (e.g., listen to others)
P	Open to others ideas and thoughts
P	Know and get along with your family
P	Self-control (e.g., do not get angry or pout when things don't go their way or they lose)
T	Help others with academics
T	Exhibit leadership qualities (e.g., leader in the classroom)

Note. P = Parent; T = Teacher

Table 4

Social Behaviors Only Reported by 5th Grade Parents and/or Teachers

Source	Social Behavior
P,T	Give praise and compliments to others (support and encourage them)
P	Communicate verbally about problems and frustrations
P	Accepting of others (e.g., do not discriminate against race, SES, etc.)
P	Good listener (e.g., listen to others)
P	Open to others ideas and thoughts
P	Know and get along with your family
P	Self-control (e.g., do not get angry or pout when things don't go their way or they lose)
T	Help others with academics
T	Exhibit leadership qualities (e.g., leader in the classroom)

Note. P = Parent; T = Teacher

Table 5

Social Behaviors Only Reported by Children

Grade	Social Behavior
2nd	Good hygiene (e.g., clean)
2nd	Generous and share (e.g., give you toys, money)
5th	Fair (e.g., take turns, make decisions together about how to play games)
5th	Have things in common with friends (e.g., do and play what they like to)
5th	Choose you for their partner (e.g., recess or in gym)

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